National
Transportation
Safety Board

Safety Information

Washington, D.C. 20594

STATEMENT

BY THE

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

BEFORE THE

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

SENATE OF ARIZONA

ON

TEEN DRIVING SAFETY

SB 1347

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

FEBRUARY 6, 2007

Good afternoon, Chairman Gould, and members of the Committee on Transportation. The National Transportation Safety Board is please to offer this statement on its teen driving safety recommendations and information on our investigations of accidents involving young drivers.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress to investigate transportation accidents, determine their probable cause, and make recommendations to prevent their recurrence. The recommendations that arise from our investigations and safety studies are our most important product. The Safety Board cannot mandate implementation of these recommendations. However, in our 39-year history, organizations and government bodies have adopted more than 80 percent of our recommendations.

The Safety Board has recognized for many years that motor vehicle crashes are responsible for more deaths than crashes in all other transportation modes combined. More than 90 percent of all transportation-related deaths each year result from highway crashes. A disproportionate number of these highway crashes involve teen drivers age 15 through 20, young people who have only recently obtained their licenses to drive. Young drivers have been the focus of U.S. driver licensing systems primarily because they constitute the largest group of beginners and have the highest crash risk.

THE PROBLEM

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, traffic crashes account for 40 percent of all deaths among 15-20 year olds, making traffic crashes the leading cause of death for this age group, more than from suicides or drugs. Crash rates for young drivers are significantly higher than crash rates for other driving populations. Young drivers age 15-20 years make up about 6.3 percent of the driving population, but comprise 13.6 percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes. Further, more than 21 percent of all highway fatalities occur in crashes involving teen drivers. Crash statistics for Arizona are just as ominous. In 2004, teens made up less than 6 percent of the driving population, but constituted about 13.7 percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes. Approximately 20.8 percent of the deaths on Arizona roads occurred in crashes involving teen drivers.

While these numbers define a serious problem, it is individual tragedies that make us recognize the critical importance of addressing this issue. The Safety Board has been monitoring the large number of teen traffic fatalities in Arizona for several years.

While the emotional costs are staggering, the financial costs are equally astounding. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) calculated that the lifetime cost to society for each fatality is over $977,000, and those not directly involved in crashes pay for nearly three-quarters of all crash costs, primarily through insurance premiums, taxes, and travel delay. Therefore, the tragic lives lost across our nation cost society billions of dollars.

A number of studies by Federal agencies, the States, private organizations, and others have shown that 16-year-olds are more likely to be involved in single vehicle crashes, be responsible for the crash, be cited for speeding, and carry more passengers in their vehicles than older drivers. Such crashes are most likely to occur from 10 p.m. to midnight on Friday and Saturday nights. Although young drivers do only 20 percent of their driving at night, over half the fatalities of young drivers occur during nighttime hours.

A recent analysis of 10 years of data conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that the majority of fatalities in teen crashes are persons other than the teenaged drivers themselves. This is consistent with the Safety Board's review of young driver crashes. AAA found that more than 61 percent of those killed in accidents involving teen drivers were either passengers, occupants of other vehicles, or non-motorists such as pedestrians.

Young drivers typically carry more passengers in their cars than older drivers, and these passengers are usually around the same age as the driver. Often this results in a deadly combination of inattention, inexperience, and immaturity. A recent study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association concluded that the risk of death increased significantly with each additional teen passenger transported by a teen driver. In single vehicle crashes involving teen drivers, two-thirds of fatally injured passengers were also teens (between ages 15 and 19).

Our current driver education system does not teach young people to drive; it teaches them to pass a test. Learning to drive is a long-term process, one that cannot be effectively managed through the traditional driver education program. Once the basic skills are learned, extensive additional "on the job" training without distractions, and with the assistance of a more mature and experienced driver is needed. As their skills and maturity develop, young novice drivers can then proceed to full licensure.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

Teen Driver Licensing Safety (also known as Graduated Driver Licensing in many States)

After reviewing crashes involving drivers under the age of 21, in 1993, the Safety Board recommended that Arizona and the other States take several specific actions, including implementation of a comprehensive provisional license system for young novice drivers, also known as graduated driver licensing (GDL). The model program requires young novice drivers to proceed through three stages—a learner's permit, an intermediate or provisional license, and a full license. GDL establishes restrictions so that, until the driver has had an opportunity to gain experience, initial driving occurs in less dangerous circumstances. Restrictions are lifted after successful completion of the learning and intermediate stages, without any moving violations or crashes attributed to the driver.

Strengthening your graduated driver licensing law is an important step that will reduce needless deaths and injuries on Arizona highways and help thousands of young drivers in Arizona

to adjust to their new driving responsibilities. Teen driver licensing measures may be even more critical in Arizona because of rapid population increases caused by migration from other States.

Based on research by the Safety Board, NHTSA, and others, the Board recommends that the basic elements of a three-stage GDL program include the following:

- **A learner's permit with—**
  - A minimum 6-month holding period, during which a licensed driver who is at least 21 years old supervises the permit holder.
  - A minimum period of 6 months without at-fault crashes or traffic violations (and accelerated penalties if the driver has an at-fault crash or traffic violation) before proceeding to the intermediate or provisional license.
  - At least 50 hours of supervised driving practice with a licensed driver who is at least 21 years old.
  - A prohibition on the use of interactive wireless communication devices while driving.
  - Mandatory seat belt use and zero tolerance of alcohol use (under age 21).
- **An intermediate stage with—**
  - A minimum 6-month holding period for the intermediate or provisional license.
  - A nighttime driving restriction that prohibits the intermediate or provisional license holder from driving unsupervised at night, particularly between the hours of midnight and 5:00 a.m.
  - A passenger restriction that allows no more than one other passenger in the vehicle, unless the driver is accompanied by a supervising licensed adult at least 21 years old.
  - A minimum period of 6 months without at-fault crashes or traffic violations (and accelerated penalties if the driver has an at-fault crash or traffic violation) before proceeding to the full license.
  - A cell phone (wireless communications device) use restriction while driving for at least 6 months of the intermediate stage.
  - Mandatory seat belt use and zero tolerance of alcohol use (under age 21).
- **Full license with—**
  - Mandatory seat belt use and zero tolerance of alcohol use (under age 21).

Nighttime Driving Restrictions

Nighttime driving restrictions are especially important and effective in reducing crashes. Forty-three percent of teen motor vehicle deaths in 2001 occurred between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. Studies have revealed that nighttime driving restrictions are associated with crash reductions of up to 60 percent during the restricted hours. A 1984 study of nighttime driving restrictions in four States found among 16-year-old drivers that crashes were reduced by 69 percent in Pennsylvania, 62 percent in New York, 40 percent in Maryland, and 25 percent in Louisiana. Because many of these crashes occur in the evening hours, a greater crash reduction is achieved

when the restriction starts earlier in the night. Many States include conditions or exemptions related to work or school, and may limit routes or number of passengers as well.

Many parents and even young drivers support the restriction when they understand the justification for it. A November 1994 survey by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) found that 74 percent of parents of 16 and 17-year-olds favor night driving restrictions for beginning drivers. Of those in favor, 48 percent preferred a restriction beginning at 10 p.m. A telephone survey of 16- to 18-year-olds in four States with such restrictions indicated that 47 percent in Indiana, 63 percent of the teens surveyed in Illinois, 67 percent in New York, and 80 percent in Pennsylvania were in favor of some kind of night driving restrictions for beginning teen drivers.

IIHS conducted follow-up surveys in 1999 of parents in Connecticut and Florida whose children had recently obtained their driver's licenses. These parents were even more supportive than they had been during initial interviews in 1996, before their teens had begun the licensing process. Few parents reported that the laws had inconvenienced them. Many were in favor of additional requirements, such as passenger restrictions, that were not currently part of their State's laws.

Passenger Restrictions

In 2002, the Safety Board added a passenger restriction to its original GDL recommendation after investigating several crashes and reviewing new research on the involvement of young novice drivers in crashes. The crash investigations and research illustrated the tragic consequences of allowing inexperienced young drivers to drive with multiple teen passengers in the vehicle.

The presence of teen passengers can adversely influence the risk-taking behavior of teen drivers, leading to crashes with increased injuries and death for both the drivers and their passengers. The relative risk of death among 16- and 17-year-old drivers who have at least one passenger in the car is substantially greater than the risk when driving alone. The risk increases with each additional passenger. Carrying at least three teen passengers results in a threefold increase in the probability of a teen in that vehicle being killed.

The National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances added a passenger restriction to its Model Graduated Licensing Law in 2000, and incorporated it into the Uniform Vehicle Code (UVC). Elements of the UVC model law include the following:

- No more than one passenger under age 20 is allowed unless a supervising driver is present or until the driver receives full licensure.
- Passenger exemptions are granted for family members to ride with an unsupervised provisional licensed driver.

Based on the available research, the UVC model law, and FARS data, the Safety Board concluded that by restricting to zero or one the number of passengers carried by teen drivers during the intermediate stage, States can substantially reduce crashes involving young novice drivers and can reduce fatalities among teen occupants. The Board also concluded that if the passenger restriction lasts only a few months, it is unlikely to have a substantial safety benefit. The Board, therefore, believes that Arizona should restrict young novice drivers with an intermediate license from carrying more than one passenger under the age of 20 until they receive an unrestricted license or for at least 6 months (whichever is longer).

Cell Phone (Wireless Communication Device) Restrictions

In 2003, the Safety Board examined the role that driver distraction plays in motor vehicle crashes, especially when the driver is inexperienced. The Board concluded that current State laws are inadequate to protect young, novice drivers from distractions that can lead to crashes. The Board recommended that States enact legislation to prohibit holders of learner's permits and intermediate licenses from using interactive wireless communication devices while driving. The recommendation is derived from the Board's investigation of the February 1, 2002, Ford Explorer Sport collision with a Ford Windstar minivan and a Jeep Grand Cherokee on Interstate 95/495 near Largo, Maryland.

This crash involved multiple risk factors, some of which are associated with young drivers. The crash driver, who was 20 years old, was unbelted, and had had only an estimated 50 hours of driving experience. She was operating a short-wheelbase sport utility vehicle, with which she was unfamiliar and she was driving 15-20 miles over the speed limit, while talking on a handheld wireless telephone. The crash caused the death of five people including the young driver.

Learning how to drive and becoming comfortable in traffic requires all the concentration a novice driver can muster. According to a 2001 study, even experienced drivers engaged in wireless telephone conversations were unaware of traffic movements around them. Moreover, the use of wireless communication devices has become increasingly prevalent. Recent NHTSA research documented that an estimated 6 percent of drivers used hand held cell phones during daylight hours in 2005. This translates into approximately 974,000 drivers on the road nationwide at any time during the day that are using a hand-held phone.

In January 2002, New Jersey passed a law prohibiting holders of special learner's permits, driver's examination permits, and provisional driver's licenses from using any interactive wireless communication device while operating a motor vehicle. On May 23, 2003, the Governor of Maine signed a law restricting drivers under age 18, including persons with an instruction permit and holders of restricted licenses, from "operating a motor vehicle while using a mobile phone." Today, 10 States and the District of Columbia restrict cell phone use by drivers with a learner's and/or intermediate license. The Safety Board recommends that Arizona enact similar legislation and prohibit holders of learner's permits and intermediate licenses from using an interactive wireless communication device while driving.

Beginning drivers should be introduced gradually to the driving experience. They should be provided the maximum time to practice, under the safest possible real-world conditions. They should be given the opportunity to gradually develop the skills needed for full licensure. For young drivers to have the chance to develop their skills, we need to create a support system that involves parents and guardians. We need to quickly identify young problem drivers before bad habits and behaviors become ingrained, and then take action to correct those problems. GDL has been described as "training wheels for young drivers." This analogy makes good sense; we do not proceed from walking to riding a bicycle in one step. We need training wheels to make the driving process safer.

STATE IMPLEMENTATION

There has been a revolution in driver licensing laws in the past 10 years. Virtually every State has strengthened its driver licensing system. Today, only five States (Arizona, Arkansas, Kansas, Minnesota, and North Dakota) do not have an intermediate licensing stage. With the 2006 enactment of a comprehensive law in Kentucky, 44 States (and the District of Columbia) now have nighttime driving restrictions, and 34 States (and the District of Columbia) have some form of passenger restriction.

SUCCESS STORIES

Teen driver licensing safety legislation (GDL) does make a difference. According to the National Safety Council, 16-year-old drivers in States with GDL systems are involved in 33 percent fewer traffic crashes. And every evaluation of crashes in States with GDL systems has identified crash reductions of up to 60 percent.

Individual States have had great success with GDL. In 2001, after Iowa enacted GDL, the Iowa Department of Transportation reported that 16-year-old drivers were involved in 20 percent fewer traffic crashes than the same group in 1998, the last year before the system was adopted. In addition, 16-year-old drivers received 38 percent fewer traffic convictions than in 1998.

North Carolina implemented a comprehensive graduated licensing system with a 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. nighttime driving restriction in December 1997. A 2003 review of North Carolina's crash data found a 23-percent reduction in injuries and deaths involving 16-year-old drivers. Nighttime crashes (during the restricted hours) decreased more than those during daytime hours. Both the number of crashes and the rate, based on population, declined dramatically.

Reviews from other States have consistently shown significant crash reductions:

- **California** – A review by the Auto Club of Southern California found that there was a 20 percent reduction in at-fault fatal and injury crashes for 16-year-old drivers. Injuries and fatalities of teen passengers decreased by 40 percent.

- **Delaware** – For drivers 16 years old, fatal crashes decreased by 43 percent and all crashes decreased by 42 percent. For drivers 17 years old, fatal crashes decreased by 72 percent and all crashes decreased by 21 percent.
- **Florida** – For drivers age 15 through age 17, IIHS found a 9-percent reduction in fatal and injury crashes.
- **Michigan** – For drivers 16 years old, the risk of being involved in a crash in 1999 was 25 percent lower than the risk in 1996.
- **Louisiana** – For drivers 15 years old, crashes fell by 25 percent during the nighttime driving restriction hours.
- **New York** – For 16- and 17-year-old drivers, the nighttime driving restriction resulted in a 62-percent crash reduction.
- **Pennsylvania** – GDL is credited with a 27-percent reduction in crashes, a 32-percent reduction in injuries, and a 58-percent reduction in fatalities. For drivers under age 18, there was a 69-percent reduction in crashes during the nighttime driving restriction hours.

CONCLUSION

From 1997 through 2004, across the nation, more than 54,000 people died in crashes involving teen drivers. In that period in Arizona, 1,645 people died in teen driver crashes.

Highway crashes involving young drivers will remain a serious and persistent problem unless concrete and comprehensive steps are taken. Our young people are this Nation's most valuable resource, one that must be nurtured and protected. Too many of them are being killed and injured unnecessarily.

Mr. Chairman, the Safety Board asks that you enact legislation to improve adopt teen driver licensing safety legislation such as in SB 1347 to implement a system that has been proven to work in 45 other States. We urge you to require a minimum holding period for learner's permits, to require at least 50 hours of supervised driving practice in the learner's permit stage, and to add a passenger and cell phone restriction.

The Board believes an effective combination of tough, fair laws; vigorous enforcement; and an intensive, targeted educational campaign is needed. We are so convinced of graduated driver licensing's life-saving benefit that we have included teen driver licensing safety legislation (GDL) on the Board's list of "Most Wanted" recommendations. A comprehensive teen licensing (GDL) system is one of the most effective actions that the Arizona legislature can take to save both young lives and the lives of others involved in crashes with young drivers.

Thank you again for permitting the Safety Board to provide a statement about this important problem. If you have any questions, please contact Kevin Quinlan, Chief, Safety Advocacy Division at 202-314-6175 at any time or 202-320-8416 during the week of February 5, 2007.